

Making sense of ability grouping: Understanding the educational rationale and psychological effects of ability grouping in Uganda's secondary schools

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed at exploring the rationale for and psychological effects of ability grouping in secondary schools. It was anchored mainly on the reference group theory. Following a qualitative approach and an explorative and phenomenological design, the study was conducted among 14 participants, that is, head teachers and students who were selected using purposive sampling. Data were analysed using themes and subthemes; hence, thematic analysis. Findings from interviews and focus group discussions reveal that schools adopt ability grouping practices for purposes related to enabling customised instruction, enhancing peer learning, optimising academic potential, improving learning outcomes and managing classrooms. The psychological effects of ability grouping emerged as those related to students' self-esteem, confidence, motivation, engagement, identity, stigma and anxiety. In conclusion, ability grouping must be carefully planned and implemented to avoid its negative effects on learners. It is therefore recommended that schools and stakeholders involved in ability grouping take into account the psychological effects of the practice and adopt strategies that enhance support and self-esteem, reduce stigma, train teachers and consider parents' views and feelings about the practice. Schools must practise flexible grouping, continuous assessment, training and ongoing teacher professional development and monitoring, and equitable distribution of materials and resources.

Keywords: Ability Grouping, Educational Rationale, Psychological Effects, Secondary Schools

I. INTRODUCTION

The educational practice of dividing learners into distinct groups, based on perceived achievement and ability, both within classes (Nomi, 2009; Wilkinson et al., 2016) and between classes (Kususanto et al., 2010; Tan & Dimmock, 2022), either at class or subject level (Wang et al., 2021), has become a trending and widely-practiced strategy, in not only elementary but also high schools in Uganda and beyond. Goals of effective teaching and learning have witnessed student grouping in comparison to mixing them, which has been the norm in recent years. The rationale behind ability grouping as an ability practice is to tailor all forms of instruction to meet the individual learner's unique learning needs, in order to enable them achieve growth and improvement of academic achievement and performance. These end goals are targeted towards both group and individual academic growth. The determination of grouping is primarily based on displayed potential or performance in past assessments. In most scenarios and circumstances, ability groups are usually of small and manageable sizes. The practice can be purposive (Wang et al., 2021) and based on academic achievement (Steenberg et al., 2016) but it must be noted that it has effects of separation and/or polarisation (OECD, 2016) yet it does not guarantee improved grades among students (Slavin, 1990). It further deepens academic disparities and differences, and promotes injustice and inequality (Boaler et al., 2000). What is often underscored is the role of teachers or teacher practices within ability grouping (DeBoer et al., 2010). Therefore, in all forms of ability grouping, teacher support must be appreciated as it is critical in defining how best ability grouping can shape learning and identifying to who the practice might be detrimental.

The original rationale behind the practice of ability grouping was to assist instructors to offer support to learners under their custodianship based on their cognitive differences (Okello, 2019). It is presumed that learners in

homogeneous rather than heterogeneous groups benefit from tailored instruction targeting their individual learning needs and aptitudes (Nusser & Gehrler, 2020; Good et al., 1984) hence appropriate assistance and support. As much as the rationale is positive, its potential effects on learners within and beyond the classroom and academic boundaries cannot be ignored (Ambreen, 2017; Marks, 2014). Ability grouping is aimed at reducing heterogeneity. Many countries, both in the developed and developing world, practice ability grouping in their schools, where high performers are assigned to higher tracks (Wang et al., 2021) and who stand a high chance of joining university (De Boer et al., 2010).

Ability grouping comes in two basic forms, that is, within-class and between-class grouping. The former, as argued by Macintyre and Ireson (2002) is a method of grouping students that targets a reduction in heterogeneity and enables attainment through the avoidance of emotional and social shortfalls of streaming (Gregory, 1984). The latter on the other hand, that is between class grouping, is the method or ability practice where different classes within the same school are assigned to different streams or tracks (Tan & Dimmock, 2022) for all the diverse subjects (Chmielewski, et al., 2013). Other terms used to mean and describe ability grouping include cognitive based classroom streaming (Okello, 2019), tracking (George, 1988, 1993; Oakes, 1983), homogenous grouping (Esposito, 1973; Heltemes, 2008; McGaughy, 1930), streaming (Mansor et al., 2016) and differentiated instruction (Kotob & Abadi, 2019; Tieso, 2003).

The study was informed mainly by the reference group theory by Hyman (1942) which has its roots and foundations in the social sciences. According to Hyman, students placed in diverse ability groups are influenced by norms and behaviours of that particular group, which in turn affects their learning and academic performance. The students are expected to adopt values and attitudes of the groups where they have been placed, which leads to both appetitive and non-appetitive outcomes on both self-concept and achievement. Hence, the study sought to explore the rationale for and effects of ability grouping, in order to unearth the best practices, if the positive outcomes are to be realised.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Ability grouping has become a widely used instructional practice with an end goal of facilitating teacher effectiveness and learner academic achievement. In the Ugandan context, the actual and evidence-based rationale is still under explored. More still, studies focusing on its psychological effects on learners remain scanty. Hence an existent knowledge gap on its rationale and psychological effects. Whereas ability grouping may have positive objectives behind them, its aversive effects on learners cannot be ignored and these effects come in diverse forms such as those on students' psychological well-being in the areas of self-esteem, self-efficacy (Hendricks, 2009), motivation (Saleh et al., 2007), engagement (Kurian, 2019) and possible school dropout (Van Houtee & Demanet, 2016), self-concept (Adeloduni, 2021; Belfi et al., 2012), attitudes towards studying (Vogl & Preckel, 2014) and emotional growth if not well intentioned during planning and initiation, and well-regulated during implementation. The effects of ability grouping are not only academic but also psychological and social in nature. If these key aspects of ability grouping go on without inquiry such as this research, schools may continue to implement the practice using strategies that negatively affect learners unintentionally. Therefore, this study aims at investigating the educational rationale and psychological effects of ability grouping on secondary school learners in Uganda in order to inform instructional decisions that support learners and learning in general.

1.2 Research Objectives

- i. To investigate the rationale for ability grouping in Uganda's secondary schools.
- ii. To explore the psychological effects of ability grouping on secondary school learners.

1.3 Research Questions

- i. What is the rationale for ability grouping in Uganda's secondary schools?
- ii. What are the psychological effects of ability grouping on secondary school learners?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

Theoretically, the study was informed by theories such as the reference group (Halliman et al., 2003; Hyman, 1942; Ireson & Hallam, 1999; Richer, 1976), social cultural (Tzuriel, 2021; Verenikina, 2003; Vygotsky, 1981), social learning (Bandura & Walters, 1977), cognitive development (Huitt & Hummel, 2003; Piaget, 1990) and self-determination theories (Bourgeois & Boberg, 2016; Deci & Ryan, 2012). Collectively, these theories advocate for mixed ability grouping practices such as scaffolding (Do & Carey, 2016; Hunter, 2007) against homogeneous practices that limit student interactions and collaborations (Hallinan et al., 2003; Jones & Gerig, 1994; Saleh et al., 2007), through which they can learn from each other. On the other hand, ability grouping helps in tailoring and aligning teaching to learners' levels of development (Hallinan et al., 2003). As an ability practice, ability grouping affects learner motivation

both positively and negatively (Chessor, 2014; Williams, 1972) and this is dependent upon the effects on learners' level of academic competence.

2.2 Empirical Review

Ability grouping has been practiced in schools for several reasons, such as, to achieve individualised instruction (Slavin, 1990). It is meant to differentiate the subject curriculum and make it easier, and the student to adapt to the strategies of teaching in order to meet both individual and group needs (Jordan, 1965; Slavin, 1990). Also, ability grouping targets resolving challenges related to low attention span (Felmlee & Eder, 1983), idleness and cognitive laziness that are associated with heterogeneous groups that include students of all diverse cognitive potential. Because heterogeneous groups make learners develop a false sense of superiority due to lack of challenges, the reverse is true under homogeneous grouping (Fiedler et al., 2002). The other rationale is aimed at promoting healthy competition among slow learners (Hwang, 2013). In mixed groups, the gifted students are overwhelmed by being subjected to the role of stimulating the average and slow learners, but this is resolved under ability grouping where they are given the instructional attention they deserve (Felmlee & Eder, 1983). Ability grouping is also aimed at enabling friendships and interpersonal relationships to happen only outside the classroom environment (Kutnick et al., 2005).

In terms of effects, ability grouping has both academic and non-academic outcomes. Academically, the ability practice has both positive and negative outcomes and is more beneficial to the gifted students when they receive tailored instruction in separate tracks (Kulik & Kulik, 1984) specifically in secondary schools, while its effects are detrimental on moderate and low performing students. Therefore, ability groups benefit high ability students at the expense of their low-ability counter-parts, and hence, this shortfall must be illuminated (Gamoran et al., 1995). The achievements are in terms of student participation especially among honours' students. Among secondary school students, ability grouping affects academic achievement (Slavin, 1990) and learning (Halliman, 2000) because ideally, the practice is expected to maximise achievement among learners as a goal, and again, this benefits the students who are assigned to higher ability tracks, because they stand to benefit from instruction that is of high quality. However, lower track students receive the opposite.

It is also noted that ability grouping has instructional and institutional effects since teaching is differentiated between the existent groups and affects content coverage. The institutional effects have a lot to do with resource allocation (Betts & Shkolnik, 2000). This also has effects on student motivation as they are driven to study harder in order to maintain or attain high status tracks. However, the effect of ability grouping on academic achievement has not been found to be statistically significant (Goldberg, 1966). High ability students continue to perform better while low ability students' performance continues to worsen (Betts & Shkolnik, 2000). Academic self-efficacy too as a cross cutting attribute between academics and psychological self-concept, has been affected by ability grouping (Cheung & Rudowicz, 2003). Psychologically, ability grouping has caused dynamics in students' self-concept at different degrees (Ireson et al., 2001).

This also affects learners' self-esteem and ultimately influences their attitude towards school work and school in general (Gamoran & Berends, 1987). Still on self-concept and self-esteem, more researchers continue to assert that these psychological aspects are affected by ability practices such as homogeneous grouping (Gross & Smith, 2021; Kususanto et al., 2010; Maurer, 2020). Another psychological attribute affected by ability grouping is student motivation (Chessor, 2014) and socialisation and social relationship (Okello, 2019; Vogl & Preckel, 2014) because it affects how learners across the different tracks interact partly due to self-inflicted and social stigma that emanates from ability grouping (Baker, 2018; Ireson & Hallam, 2001; McManus, 2010). It is because of these effects that the researchers set out to investigate the rationale for and the lived effects, as bases for the formulation of the best practices that can assist educators reap the intended benefits of ability grouping as an ability practice.

III. METHODOLOGY

In this study, we utilised a qualitative and an exploratory (Stevens & Wrenn, 2013) phenomenological (Bliss, 2016; Englander, 2016) approach and design respectively, to investigate the rationale and effects of ability grouping in secondary schools in Uganda. The design was preferred because of its ability to enable the researcher to submit detailed and defensible explanations of the phenomenon under investigation (Klenke, 2016). The target population were school administrators for the rationale for ability grouping and students for the effects of the practice. The sample size was 14, that is, two school administrators (A1 and A2) and 12 students (S1-S12). Data were collected using both interviews (Alshenqeeti, 2014) for the administrators and focus group discussions for the students. The administrators and students were selected purposively as policy makers and implementers, and recipients respectively. In the same vein, administrators and students from schools where ability grouping is not practiced were excluded from the study (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). Data was recorded with a phone recorder, transcribed, and themes generated. The same themes guided the thematic content analysis (Humble & Mozelius, 2022; Neuendorf, 2018). Data analysis and discussion were conducted concurrently.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Rationale for Ability Grouping

According to the school administrators who were subjected to in-depth interviews, the justifications and rationale for the implementation of ability grouping turned out to be academic and educational in nature as described under the following themes.

4.1.1 Customising Instruction

From the interviews, it emerged that schools practice ability grouping in order to reap the benefits of tailored instruction, targeting the unique and individual learning needs of the learners placed in the homogenous groups. This customisation revolves around teaching strategies, content knowledge and pace, as one head teacher expressed,

You see, as much as many parents don't like this practice, us the ones that set learning goals for our learners know very well that if each student, in their own individual academic potential, is to benefit from teaching, they need to be placed with students of similar capacity so that the teacher knows how much effort, which method and at what speed he or she is to teach when teaching a specific class. This is the main reason why we divide these students into these learning units, so the goal is positive, with no negative outcomes in mind (Participant A1, female)

This was also re-echoed by a school administrator from another school who argued that customised instruction as a goal of ability grouping is aimed at helping students have their unique academic needs catered for,

We aim at teachers making an effort to match their teaching and instruction to the learners' level of aptitude and understanding, and also hope that these same teachers practice a teaching pace that is relative whereby we expect them to teach faster the students in upper streams and slower to the mediocre and low achievement students. The problem is not the practice itself since the goals are pro-students but the way it is implemented and if the goals are adhered to all through the learners' educational and academic journey (Participant A2, male).

Therefore, at the forefront of ability grouping as an ability practice in secondary schools, school administrators have genuine goals to offer learners instruction that is tailored to their level of understanding, application and memorisation of content knowledge taught to them, for the end goal of achieving to the best of their ability in their stratified groups. These findings concur with those conducted by Slavin (1990) whose systematic reviews tackle and discuss differentiated instruction as a goal of ability grouping, and Park and Datnow (2017) who confirm that ability grouping is geared towards differentiated instruction and its benefits. In the same vein, Fogarty (2004) further confirm the tailored instruction goals of ability grouping.

4.1.2 Improving Learning Outcomes

Secondly, it was argued, by the school administrators that one major rationale behind ability grouping in schools is to enable improvement in grades at whatever level and in whichever stream, as one asserted,

We must appreciate that at the end of the day, every learner should be growing and improving in their academic grades and if this is to be achieved, then ability grouping comes in handy. The weak, average and high achievers are expected to benefit from ability grouping through the improvement of their grades, which is the ultimate expected outcome at the end of the academic calendar. When learners are placed together with their academic peers, it is hoped that they learn faster and improve on their previous performance (Participant A2, male).

When asked to elaborate on how this hope for improved performance outcomes is possible, the same head teacher argued,

This hope and trajectory comes in several ways, we as administrators and school owners project that because of ability grouping, instruction and teaching will be aligned with students' knowledge and skills' standing, teaching will be paced, support will be offered to students based on their needs, engagement will be enhanced and peer teaching and learning will be enabled. Truthfully, if the implementation of ability grouping is done properly, the learning environment and subsequent learning outcomes will be more responsive and the academic growth of the learners will happen, without a doubt (Participant A2, male).

This argument is suggestive of a positive rationale but this is stringent upon good practices of ability grouping because the reverse could have the potential of deepening and widening of the learning outcome and achievement gaps if students in high performance tracks or streams receive more attention than their counterparts in the low achieving streams. These studies concur with those done by Hallinan et al. (2003) and Kiss (2017) who relate ability grouping goals to academic achievement and academic performance as intended outcomes of the practice.

4.1.3 Maximising Potential

From the interviews with school administrators, it also emerged that one other goal of ability grouping is to enable learners of different academic aptitudes be able to maximise their academic ability, as one argued,

When we embark on ability grouping between classes, we hope to enable learners maximise their academic abilities and potentials by providing scenarios for enrichment and improvement, maximise how time available for each group is efficiently utilised, motivate learners, improve their self-esteem, offer individualised support for students that are slow, and offer those in higher streams challenges that align with their ability without delaying their progress unnecessarily, through providing them with academic challenges that are group-appropriate (Participant A1, female).

This was also submitted by the second school administrator who argued,

What this practice does is treat each student according to their category, which is hard to achieve if they are bundled up together in one stream. The week students will receive attention and be saved from unnecessary and stressful competition from their more clever classmates. (Participant A2, male).

This is in agreement with previous studies conducted by Hallinan et al. (2003) who emphasise learning potential maximisation as a goal of ability grouping in schools. Ireson and Hallam (2009) also view ability grouping as a push towards the desire by schools and practitioners to achieve the highest possible level of attainment among students

4.1.4 Reinforcing Peer Learning

It emerged too that ability grouping in schools is geared towards creating and enhancing peer collaborations among learners in academic tasks, as one school administrator asserted,

The comfort and safe feeling students feel when grouped according to their different abilities is what we aim at. When they are mixed up, the weak students may not feel confident enough to collaborate and become active participants in the learning process. But we always hope that when they are separated, then this fear will be arrested. It is hoped that this may be achieved through ways that only ability grouping can offer, for example, enabling participation through questions, classmates tutoring their counterparts, joint problem or task-solving, explanation of concepts that can easily be grasped, and facilitating collaborative learning through discussions. (A1, female).

Hence, the goal is peer learning through collaboration, common goals' sharing, understanding, leadership and participation. Such sentiments in favour of ability grouping are also in line with studies conducted by Hallinan et al. (2003) who assert that students are hoped to find and work within academic peer groups, while Degeng (2017) asserts that this intended benefit of ability grouping aims at achieving collaborative learning. Also, Mills and Durden (1992) refers to this goal as co-operative learning while Agrawal et al. (2017) refer to this rationale as peer learning.

4.1.5 Enabling Classroom Management

Last but not least, the school administrators pointed out classroom management as one of the rationales of ability grouping, as one asserted,

Because similar students are placed in one stream, they will be easy to plan for and manage. (A2, male).

This was further elaborated upon by the other administrator who had a more detailed argument for classroom management as a goal of ability grouping,

Teachers can, with ease, plan prospective lessons that are geared towards each student category's needs. Additionally, they can pay attention to the learners' individual learning needs and existent changes within groups. Academic and behavioural changes can easily be monitored and forwarded to administration, and time is effectively put to use since learners in specific groups learn at a relatively similar speed. (A1, female).

These reasons match those presented by Tan and Dimmock (2022) who argue that ability grouping is aimed at resolving challenges associated with classroom management and control, while Tieso (2003) relates this rationale with classroom management of student behaviour. Last but not least, Blachford and Russel (2019), in their study on class size, grouping practices and classroom management highlight the importance of the practice on the attribute.

Therefore, in summary, from the submission from school administrators, who are the primary advocators for ability practices such as ability grouping, the arguments for the practice range from the desire to customise instruction to encouraging peer learning, maximising learner potential, enabling classroom management and, last but not least, improving learning outcomes.

4.2 Psychological Effects of Ability Grouping

According to the students that are subjected to ability grouping, the practice affects them both positively and negatively psychologically. Firstly, the positive psychological effects include **increase in confidence** especially among students placed in the upper tracks as one respondent confessed,

Ever since I was assigned to senior three north, I feel proud of myself for having achieved this placement. When I was in stream east last year in senior two. I did not feel confident enough to even interact with those that were in the north stream. I now know I am capable of excelling and what gives me confidence is seeing myself in the same stream as the brightest of them all. I can now walk on the school compound with my head high, and I am not ashamed of declaring which stream I belong to (S2, Upper, male).

However, the reverse was reported from students in the lower track, that ability grouping has negatively affected their confidence, as one student admitted,

Hmmm, I don't like this at all at all. Because of ability grouping, I feel inadequate and incapable of ever passing. I feel inadequate. (S11, Lower, male).

These submissions point to the realisation that irrespective of whether the effects are positive or negative, ability grouping affects students' confidence, self-esteem and academic self-efficacy. These findings are in agreement with those conducted by Gross and Smith (2021) who link ability grouping with students' self-esteem, Maurer (2020) whose study links ability grouping with both self-esteem and confidence, Hendricks (2009) whose study's focus is on the relationship between the ability practice and self-efficacy, and last but not least, Francis et al. (2017) whose focus is on self-confidence and how it is affected by ability grouping.

Secondly, it was also revealed, through the students' focus group discussions, that ability grouping affects *student engagement*, depending on where they are placed. The learners placed in low-performing tracks reported fear to participate in on-going learning activities due to factors related to diminished confidence levels as one male respondent asserted,

When I was put in the weakest stream, something happened to my willingness to participate in class. I find it hard to ask questions, I find it hard to answer questions, because already, I feel inadequate hence my questions might be meaningless, and my answers might be weak. So I just keep quiet rather than expose my academic weakness (S12, Lower, male).

Therefore, academic engagement is one of the attributes affected by ability grouping through increased and decreased participation among upper and lower track students respectively, hence, engagement and disengagement among learners. However, a student in an upper stream expressed the reverse, as she argued,

I now, and have always been an active participant in lessons because by virtue of the fact that I am always in the upper streams, I am confident enough to ask teachers questions and respond when teachers and fellow students ask questions, and others get to learn from me. Sometimes I also get to learn from my classmates' answers. So, I am an active student in most classroom activities (S3, Upper, female).

These findings concur with similar studies conducted by Hallinan et al. (2003) whose study focuses the relationship between ability grouping and academic involvement. On the other hand, according to Jean (2016), ability grouping leads to the development of student engagement in Mathematics. Furthermore, Pinsonneault (2015)'s study focuses on how the ability practice indeed has a relationship with how students participate in the learning process. Also, instructional grouping in English classes promotes academic engagement (Brooks & Thurstone, 2010).

Thirdly, ability grouping has been credited for affecting students' *peer identity*. Students subjected to the ability practice have argued that the practice has made them develop a sense of belonging in circumstances where they are grouped with fellow students of the same academic achievement potential, as one asserted,

When I am put with students that have the same academic performance, I feel like I fit in and belong. I don't have to feel inferior or superior, since we are all equal (S8, Lower, female).

Therefore, the ability practice can be credited for impacting on learners' identity among peers. This is in line with findings in research inquiries done by McManus (2010) whose study focuses on how ability practice in middle and lower classes affects social identity and peer relationships among learners. Peer identity is also presented as a psychological outcome of ability grouping (McGillicuddy & Devine, 2020) specifically in Mathematics classes (Solomon, 2007), as these psycho-social effects affect academic progress, achievement and performance.

Fourthly, ability grouping has been blamed for causing effects related to *stigma*. This is a negative effect, which affects not only students but parents too, who are placed and have children placed in the middle and lower streams, as one student confirmed,

I have seen my classmates develop a feeling of being judged as weak academically due to this type of classroom streaming. We get labelled as weak and this also affects our parents. My mother keeps saying she gets ashamed to mention the name of my stream, so when she is asked, she whispers so that other parents do not hear and get to know that her son is in a class for weak students. Even when others do not make you feel it, it is as if my stream name is written on my forehead (S10, Lower, male).

Hence, the resultant stigma out of ability grouping is both social and self-inflicted, that is, psychological in nature. The relationship between ability grouping and stigma has been unmasked by researches done by Ireson and Hallam (2009) who assert that students in lower groups become stigmatised. On the other hand, McGillicuddy and Devine (2020) stress that stigma as a result of shame about being in the lower groups especially in primary schools is

inevitable. Also, Oakes (1983) argues that stigma out of ability grouping is a result of labels such as “retarded or academically disabled” that are a direct result of ability grouping among weaker students.

Psychologically too, ability grouping affects *motivation*. This is two-way. Students in upper streams may develop false confidence and consequently lose the drive to work harder because of the psychological comfort they acquire due to their placement, as one respondent argued,

I have seen very bright students lose morale for working harder because of the satisfaction they get from their placement (S4, Upper, male).

This, though in a different form, was also echoed by a student from a lower stream,

It is a personal choice. Due to type of grouping, you can choose to become more determined to work harder so as to achieve a better stream in future, or the morale can die further due to the lower stream placement. So, as much as bad circumstances such as ability grouping can be disadvantageous and demotivating, myself in such scenarios, I get motivated to do what it takes to ensure that the next year, I get promoted to a stream of higher status. I am that determined (S9, Lower, female)

The link between ability grouping and motivation has also been investigated by Chessor (2014) whose focus is the effect of ability grouping and motivation among gifted students. These are the category found in the upper streams. Other authors that have researched on the link between the two attributes are Ireson and Hallam (2009) whose focus is specifically on intrinsic motivation. Also, Williams (1972) who interested himself in unearthing if or not ability grouping affects student motivation and drive. Saleh et al. (2007) on the other hand, relates within class ability grouping with learner motivation. In conclusion, from this research and those in the past, it is undeniable that ability grouping has effects on motivation among learners.

Last but not least among the psychological effects of ability grouping, it emerged that the practice is responsible for the emergence of *pressure and anxiety*, irrespective of the stream category, as all the students get anxious about failure to attain higher stream membership. Those in higher streams experience intense pressure to keep within their streams while those in lower streams dedicate all their energy towards promotion to higher streams, as one student asserted,

ehhh the pressure is so high, we can't relax at all. Everything becomes geared towards getting to or maintaining higher streams (S5, Male, Upper).

This was also affirmed by another student who retorted,

We are always anxious about which stream we will be posted to. This rules our lives at school and the feeling is not good (S9, Female, Lower).

The argument that ability grouping leads to anxiety is also supported by studies done by Okello (2019) as far as general anxiety is concerned. However, another more specific anxiety that is a consequence of ability grouping is test anxiety (Chuang & Rudowicz, 2003; Vogelaar et al., 2017).

V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

Based on the findings, ability grouping is practiced in schools for reasons that revolve around the need to customise teaching, improve pedagogical outcomes, encourage student to student learning, manage and control the classroom or teaching and learning setting and optimise students' academic potential. Psychologically, ability grouping affects learners' self-esteem, academic self-efficacy, confidence, engagement and identity. Other psychological experiences attributed to ability grouping include stigma, motivation and anxiety among students. Some of these effects affect parents too. Therefore, whatever best practices are to be introduced must address these effects, for ability grouping to reap the goals for which it is adopted and implemented.

5.2 Recommendation

We therefore recommend best practices to protect students from the negative effects of ability grouping. These practices may include assessing and evaluating the grouping system regularly so that adjustments can be made based on how students grow and improve. The determinants for placement must be communicated transparently to include academic performance through assessment and teachers' views and input. It would also serve students well if the all groups are accorded relevant support in order to avoid stigmatisation. No group should receive preferential attention and treatment over another. At whatever level or group, students must maintain academic expectations that are high and receive competent and well trained teachers, learning aids and opportunities. Assessment must be continuous and formative in nature to follow up on students' progress and move them to different streams where and when necessary. Teachers must also be monitored to ascertain if they are committed to the original rationale of ability grouping through their pedagogical strategies and participate in activities that enhance professional growth and collaboration. Instructional strategies must be diversified to include both teacher-centred and student-centred teaching styles.

For ability grouping to be effective, grouping should be a short term and temporary measure, hence a tool for achieving growth and excellence, rather than differentiating learners. Interaction between students in different groups should be reinforced, for example during practical academic activities, in order to promote social interaction across the groups. Psychological effects of ability grouping should be monitored, for example the ones this study unearthed, like, motivation, self-esteem and engagement. Since it emerged that the practice affects both students and parents, the two stakeholders must be involved in grouping criteria and decisions through clear and effective communication of its rationale. The end goal of ability grouping should be academic growth, not generating high and low labels based on ability on students. There is need for educational guidance and counselling of both students and parents to enable them cope with the ever present dynamics within ability grouping.

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